

TUCKER AND ROB

Walter Cummins

From the window of the empty room Vivica had chosen for his study, Howell stared out at the garden, his view distorted by the waves and bubbles of glass panes two centuries old. Below him, Tucker and Rob were working amid the shrubbery; Rob—bare-chested in khaki shorts—balanced atop a two-step wooden ladder, reaching a shears to trim growth from a topiary hedge shaped like a swan. Tucker, scuttling on hands and knees, gathered the cuttings into a straw basket, his long black coat spread wide on a stone path, knotted hanks of hair poking out from under the brim of his floppy black hat, a wispy mustache sagging over his lips.

Howell shuddered when he imagined himself getting up from his desk and seeing the two of them every time he looked out his window. All they did, all they seemed capable of doing, was endless gardening.

Rob lifted himself onto his toes to snip stray twigs protruding from the swan's beak. The ladder wobbled, and Howell held his breath, expecting him to topple, wishing for it, the man crashing down on Tucker, both of them too maimed to ever work again. But Tucker sprang to steady the ladder, gripping it with both hands, then sprawled flat on the path, shaking his head and laughing, his mouth wide, his head bobbing.

A breeze rattled the window in its frame, and Howell knew he would have to wedge it firm if he were going to function in that space. This part of the house needed so much maintenance—layers of chipped paint on the mullions, pigeon droppings crusted on the glass, mildew in the plaster. He doubted that anyone had tended to it in decades or that Vivica and her parents had even ventured into that wing enough to notice the disrepair. But he said nothing, not even to ask Vivica why she had selected this space so far from the heart of the house. Never in his life before her had he imagined he would have his own study.

Howell saw the garden gate swing back and Neddy, his four-year-old son, step inside, pulling his tricycle by the handlebar. Where was Vivica? She was supposed to be watching the boy. When he noticed Tucker on the

ground, Neddy ran to him, laughing as if Tucker were doing something very funny, the boy and the man both laughing.

Neddy stretched out on the back of Tucker's black coat, wrapped his arms around his neck, and shouted something. Tucker lifted himself to hands and knees and began crawling around the path, hunching his shoulders, bouncing the boy up and down. Rob ignored them, continuing to trim, snipping with his shears. It sickened Howell to see his son with those two. Where was Vivica?

Howell knew by the time he hurried to the main wing of the house, down the stairs, and into the garden, Neddy would be out of sight for a good five minutes. It was better to watch. As much as he had spoken to Neddy, told him that he shouldn't be bothering the two men while they were working, the boy seemed unable to obey. When he asked Vivica to help, she told him he was being silly. Tucker and Rob were harmless beings.

Tucker reached behind and seized Neddy, rose to his feet, and began swinging him in a wide circle, until he noticed the tricycle by the gate. He set the boy down and rushed to sit on the small seat, his knees up around his shoulders, his coattails dragging as he pedaled, Neddy running behind, chasing him with happy squeals.

Howell heard Vivica's voice. Finally. She appeared in the garden, wagging a finger at Tucker as she pretended to scold him, smiling. Tucker relinquishing the tricycle, hanging his head, sputtering, "Aye, aye, missus." Vivica touched his arm, picked up the tricycle, and held Neddy's hand as she led him out of the garden, the two of them disappearing behind the house.

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It stunned Howell how much he loved Neddy, the clutch in his chest whenever his son walked into a room, or even just the thought of him, the image that appeared in his imagination at odd moments when he was in the car or sitting alone in the drawing room. That's because he never expected to be a father, he told himself, in fact, never expected to be married when he passed forty. Then he met Vivica at a party thrown by someone he barely spoke to in the office, surrounded by people who all their lives had known the right thing to say or do. As he stood alone by a window, realizing that he didn't belong, that he should find his coat and leave, he saw her approaching, sure she would walk past him, a thin, angular woman, one hand wrapped in a necklace of multicolored beads, her eyes wide and bright. Instead, she stopped before him and said, "Hello. You look like an interesting man." "You must mean my brother," he had answered. "Do you have a

brother?" "No." She laughed and touched a finger to his wrist, transmitting warmth. Even as he sensed her great appeal, the pleasure of her company, he felt bewildered. She was so poised, so much at ease, so full of grace. Why would she have interest in a man like him? He wondered if she really had mistaken him for someone else. But before he could ask, she linked her arm through his and led him to the buffet. "Let's get a drink and chat." Howell sensed immediately this woman would not mock him.

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Seated at the polished table in the formal dining room with its beamed ceiling and great chandelier, Howell poured fresh juice from their own apples for Neddy, then wine for Vivica and himself the way her father had taught him, still nervous about spilling. Neddy wanted them to toast, reaching out to touch glasses, the boy giggling at the clink, insisting they do it again, until his mother told him that was enough.

Although the windows looked out on only a corner of the garden, Howell caught a glimpse of Rob's bare back and, immediately after, Tucker's dark coat. As much as he knew he shouldn't be saying anything, that this was not the right time or the right place, he couldn't stop himself.

"Do they have to work on Sundays?" he asked.

"It's what they choose." Vivica said.

"Seven days a week. Don't they need time off?

"But what would they do?"

"Who?" Neddy asked, his voice loud and high, the way it went whenever he thought he was being excluded.

"No one you know," his mother told him.

"The same thing over and over again, dawn till past dark. It would drive me crazy."

"Maybe not doing it would drive them crazy."

He nodded and knew he had lost the debate.

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During the months after that party, Vivica came to the city every weekend, meeting Howell in her hotel room, never at his flat. When he embraced her, he always was struck by his size, how he loomed over her, her taut frame sinking into the softness of his body. Yet he felt that she was the one holding him up, that he would topple over if she stepped away. He clung so hard he feared he was hurting her, but she never cried out, never complained. Yet through all their time together he awaited an outburst, a shattering of her patience that never came.

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Howell had been nervous about moving to a country village, into a great old house amid acres of apple orchards, sharing the two dozen rooms with her parents, sure he would make terrible mistakes that revealed who he really was. To his surprise, Vivica and her parents behaved as if he had always lived with them. It was a life far from any he had ever known, could barely believe was his. When his father-in-law suffered a stroke, he grieved, shaken by the absence when they had to place the man in a nursing home.

He truly liked Vivica's mother, her enthusiasm, the way she tried to cheer her bedridden husband before he died, the way—despite his apprehension—she had welcomed him into the family when he married Vivica. She'd only asked about his own parents once, never again after he told her, "I don't see them," just nodding and saying, "It's that way sometimes." She accepted him just as he was, as Vivica often told him, "just as I do," Howell unwilling to ask who they thought they were accepting.

At times in his unease he found himself missing his small flat in the city, certainly not the living alone, but the simple ordinariness of that place—no grand ornate rooms, no cabinets filled with fine china, no polished floors or gilded frames, no wine racks in the basement, no centuries of history that

had nothing to do with him. But, most of all, no Tucker and Rob in the garden.

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Howell's obligation to keep the two men was sealed by the croaked whisper of his mother-in-law's deathbed instructions, the woman barely conscious from all the morphine. He'd been there at the bedside, holding one of her gaunt hands while Vivica gripped the other, weeping. "Be good to Tucker and Rob," he heard from lips that barely moved, and because Vivica was too upset to speak, he was the one to answer, "Yes, of course. We promise."

Howell couldn't have denied her wish. Now, every time he saw Tucker and Rob, he cursed that promise.

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Vivica's mother had explained that Rob went off to a war and wasn't the same when he returned. He never spoke a word, and no matter how cold the weather, he wouldn't wear a shirt, just shook his head when offered one or a coat. But she never told Tucker's story to Howell beyond shaking her head and saying, "His mother was a bad lot." Vivica knew no more even though she and Tucker were the same age and she could always remember his

presence in the village. He never went to the school or spent time with the other children. It wasn't that they shunned him. He always seemed happy to see them, just as he was now when he encountered another person, grinning and nodding and blurting excitement.

It took Howell some time to understand what Tucker was saying through the sounds that exploded from him, even to recognize them as words. For some reason, though Howell had never been in the military, Tucker always called him Colonel. "Good day to ye, Colonel" every time they passed on the grounds, even if it were only minutes apart.

Whenever Howell had to look at him, Tucker's eyes wouldn't hold still, darting every which way, never meeting another's glance.

To Howell's surprise, Rob and Tucker got along. At least, they were able to function as a team, Tucker seeming to know what Rob wanted him to do. Tucker called him Captain. "Aye, aye, Captain," scurrying behind Rob, handing him tools, collecting his leavings.

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Rob had a home in the village, really no more than a cottage, as clean and neat as his person even though he spent little time there, puttering in the garden long past darkness. Tucker slept in one of the sheds on the grounds,

behind a partition that separated his area from the yard tools and the tractor he loved to polish with old rags. Howell found himself staying inside evenings and weekends, unwilling to walk the grounds, to have to look at that shed, to run into Tucker and Ron and hear the sound of Tucker's babbling.

One evening while they lay in their bed, the lights out, a quarter moon visible above the tops of the shutters, Howell asked Vivica, "Do we really need them?"

She gave him a look of surprise. "They need us."

"Isn't there another way?"

"Where could they go? Who else would care for them?"

Howell shook his head. He didn't know.

He couldn't bring himself to tell Vivica how much their presence disturbed him. She was so natural with them, treated them as normal. He couldn't reveal how awful it was for him to be associated with defectives like Tucker and Ron.

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Now the two of them passed right in front of the dining room window, Rob striding as if on a march, Tucker stooped, his coat scraping the ground.

Howell turned away, so abruptly he heard his neck crack. Vivica shot him a look.

Neddy looked down at his empty plates. "May I be 'scused?"

"To do what?" Howell said.

"Ride my bike."

"All right," Vivica told him. "But stay on the paths near the house."

Together they listened to the sounds of their son's footsteps on the wooden floor of the long hallway. Vivica covered Howell's hand with hers.

Howell knew he should ask if she wanted him to open another bottle of wine. "Why not?" Vivica smiled. "It's our day to relax."

"Exactly."

"Music?"

"Fine. Let me check on Neddy first."

He stepped out to the solarium and saw Neddy in the garden, down on hands and knees beside Tucker, the two of them following Rob and picking up leaves, each one holding them up for the other to examine.

As much as Howell wanted to rush outside and seize his son, sweep him up and carry him back into the house, he knew Vivica wouldn't approve.

“Neddy needs a playmate,” she had told him once. “There’s no reason for you to be jealous.”

How could he explain to her it wasn’t that? It wasn’t that at all. With a last look at Neddy engrossed in his chore, he stepped back into the dining room.

Vivica had moved their glasses to the table between the leather chairs in the library and chosen the CD of a solo piano piece that to Howell sounded very modern, almost like jazz. He felt he should know the name of the musician but didn’t ask her who was playing, even though he knew she wouldn’t mind.

Howell set his wine glass on a coaster and closed his eyes, listening closely, liking what he heard, surprised when the percussive chords stopped and the melody turned soft and light. What seemed a sudden silence jarred him in his seat. The music was over. He looked at the clock and saw that a half hour had passed. He had dozed and realized Vivica had the same startled look. “You too?”

“That second bottle was a mistake.”

Howell stood and rubbed his eyes. “It’s time for Neddy to come in.”

Howell went to the garden first, but Neddy wasn't there. "Good day to ye, Colonel," Tucker said. "Where did he go?" Howell demanded. Tucker just shrugged. Howell walked the path outside the garden wall, expecting to see the boy each time he turned a corner, more and more anxious when he didn't. He took the pathway to the back of the house. As his vision adjusted to the dank shade under the huge willow, he saw the tricycle upended in a compost heap, the handlebars oddly twisted. Howell shouted his son's name and then Vivica's. He was trembling, bracing a hand against the brick of the building to keep his balance. In a clutch of fear, he shook his head to force out a vision of the boy's body in a window well, his throat slit, his head dangling at the same unnatural angle as the handlebars.

Vivica was touching his arm.

"I can't find him," Howell said.

Vivica called, "Neddy, Neddy, where are you?" She paused for a moment. "He has to be on the grounds. I'll look in the orchards."

"He never goes there!" Howell's voice broke. As frightened as he was, he felt shame for his panic, the weakness he was revealing. Neddy had seen a fox prancing through orchard once and came running home in tears, crying, "I don't like those trees."

But Howell didn't stop Vivica. He forced himself to stare down into the window wells and saw nothing but wet leaves, breathed the odor of their decay. Lifting the tricycle from the compost, he set it upright and wiped off the clinging vegetation.

He could hear Vivica saying their son's name. It sounded wrong, much too composed for the state of his terror, and he screamed, "Neddy!" tearing his throat. As he walked to a corner of the house, he heard himself muttering, "Oh god, oh god."

Howell gasped when something jumped from a hedge, a jackrabbit that paused to give him a glance and then sprang across the grass. Neddy would love to have seen that, running after the creature, mimicking its hops.

When he reached the front of the house, Howell stopped and spoke aloud. "He's not here. He's not here." Ahead of him, on the other side of the semicircle of white stones surrounding the main entrance, he saw the top of Tucker's hat above the garden wall and heard him blurt a meaningless sound.

Howell started running, his shoes scattering stones, grinding at them. He pushed open the gate and went directly to Tucker. "Where's my son?"

"Good day to ye, Colonel."

Howell grabbed his shoulders, dug his fingers into the slick black oilskin.

“Where the hell is my son!”

“Aye, the boy, the boy.” Tucker’s head bobbed up and down, his eyes darting wildly.

Rob moved up beside Tucker, staring directly at Howell. Howell had never seen the two men so close together, Rob’s bare flesh, pressed against Tucker’s coat.

Howell clutched the front of that coat but glared at Rob. “Tell me what you’ve done with my son! Talk, you goddamn freak!”

Rob seemed to press his lips together, locking in his silence. Howell drew back a fist, but Tucker reached out to close his fingers over it, the flesh filthy, the nails blackened. Instead of swinging out at Rob, Howell slapped Tucker with his other hand. Tucker dropped to the ground, burying his face between his knees, moaning, wrapping his arms around his chest and rocking back and forth.

Even though, in an instant of clarity, Howell realized neither of them had done anything to Neddy, he wanted to beat them both, give them great pain. Just as he was about to hit out, Howell heard his name, a voice shouting at him to stop. Vivica’s voice.

When Howell looked up, he saw Vivica standing at the gate carrying Neddy, the boy wide-eyed in her arms. She spoke calmly now. “He fell asleep under a tree in the pachysandra. I couldn’t see him in all that growth. And he didn’t hear me calling.”

Howell knew her words were as much for Tucker and Rob as they were for him, and he realized what she was seeing—he and Tucker and Rob posed together in the garden, the three of them joined like a triptych.

Walter Cummins has published six short story collections—*Witness*, *Where We Live*, *Local Music*, *The End of the Circle*, *The Lost Ones*, and in 2013, *Habitat: stories of bent realism*. More than 100 of his stories have appeared in literary magazines, along with memoirs, essays, and reviews.